

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 250 700

CS 208 656

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TITLE Psychology Students' Use of Media Coverage of Behavioral Science.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (92nd, Toronto, Canada, August 24-28, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavioral Sciences; Higher Education; *Information Sources; *Mass Media; *Mass Media Effects; *Media Research; News Reporting; Psychology; *Student Reaction
IDENTIFIERS *Media Use

ABSTRACT

To determine college students' use of the mass media and the degree to which they encounter information about psychology in them, a questionnaire was developed and administered to a sample of 469 students enrolled in college psychology courses. The questionnaire broke the mass media down into 12 categories, such as local newspapers, general audience science magazines, radio newscasts, and educational television. For each category, the student was asked to think back over the preceding 30-day period and estimate the number of times that she or he had encountered information about behavioral science. The student was also asked to list up to three examples, giving both the specific media source and the behavioral science topic in each category. The questionnaire also requested estimates of the student's general use of each medium during the same period of time as well as basic demographic information. Responses revealed that roughly only 1 student in 10 reported hearing anything pertaining to psychology on National Public Radio, that slightly less than 1 in 2 had read anything about psychology in magazines, and that the typical student saw only slightly more than one television news report related to behavioral science. On the other hand, across all 12 media categories, the typical student encountered between eight and nine items about psychology during the 30-day period, suggesting that the students encountered information about psychology in the media on a fairly regular basis. (HOD)

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Psychology Students' Use of Media Coverage of Behavioral Science

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Sales figures for Time Magazine indicate that its weekly issues containing cover stories devoted to science are repeatedly among that publication's biggest sellers. This is but one of several indicators that point to the fact that the general public is highly interested in the sciences and their findings. In response to this interest, the last several years have seen a discernible increase in mass media coverage of science. News reports focused on scientific developments, applications, etc. are more common. In addition, a number of new radio and television programs devoted extensively to science have been started, as have several magazines such as Discover and Science '84. A further development along these lines is that as media coverage of science has increased, science reporting has become a recognized area of specialization within the field of journalism.

While mass media materials have commonly been integrated into instructional contexts by teachers of psychology, the other sciences, and many other disciplines, the recent increase in media coverage of science has, for many of us—including myself and my collaborators: Alan Childs of Lafayette College and Steve Mewaldt of Marshall University—heightened our interest in the relevance of such materials to the teaching of psychology courses.

It seemed to us that effective instructional use of mass media materials could be enhanced by obtaining data from our students on their use of the mass media and the degree to which

they encountered information about psychology in them. As a result, we developed a questionnaire pertaining to these issues and administered it to a sample of our students.

Method

The questionnaire broke the mass media down into 12 categories such as local newspapers, general audience science magazines, radio newscasts, educational television, etc. The complete set of categories is described fully in Table 1. For each category, the respondent was asked to think back over the preceding 30-day period and estimate the number of times that she or he had encountered information about behavioral science. The respondent was also asked to list up to three examples, giving both the specific media source and behavioral science topic, in each category. The questionnaire also requested estimates of the respondent's general use of each medium during the same period of time as well as basic demographic information.

The survey was administered to a sample of 469 respondents enrolled in psychology courses at Lafayette College, Marshall University, and Miami University during a five-day interval in March of 1981. The general purpose of the survey was introduced and the 12 media categories were explained. In addition, the term "behavioral science" was defined broadly to include virtually all topics covered in introductory psychology textbooks. Respondents were assured confidentiality and asked to be as accurate as possible in estimating their media use.

Sample Characteristics

The sample was distributed across the three campuses as follows: Lafayette College--21%, Marshall University--40%, Miami University--39%. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents were women and 42% were men. Their ages ranged from 17 to 56 with a median age of 19.1 years. Most of the respondents, 64%, were enrolled in introductory courses, with the remaining 36% coming from advanced courses. Thirty-nine percent were freshmen, 35% sophomores, 25% upperclass students and the remaining one percent were unclassified students. Most of the respondents were full-time students--93%, while seven percent were of part-time status. A diverse array of majors were represented. The largest segment of the sample consisted of business majors, 38%, the smallest consisted of fine arts majors, three percent. Social science majors constituted 20% of the sample.

While it is difficult to determine the sample's representativeness beyond the three campuses surveyed, the demographics appear to be typical of the undergraduate students enrolling in psychology courses at many colleges and universities.

Results and Discussion

The samples' use of the various media categories to obtain information related to psychology is summarized in column 2 of Table 2. There are a number of ways to look at these data. On the negative side, one can emphasize findings such as the fact

that roughly but one respondent in 10 reported hearing anything pertaining to psychology on National Public Radio, that slightly less than one in two had read anything about psychology in magazines such as Discover, Psychology Today, or Science '84, or that the typical respondent reported seeing only slightly more than one television news report related to behavioral science during the 30-day period specified in the survey. More generally, the limited use of national newspapers, general audience science magazines, and educational radio and television is disheartening as, in our judgment, these media offer interesting, accessible, and more importantly, high quality coverage of behavioral science at a non-technical, but still reasonably sophisticated level. On the other hand, the fact that across all 12 media categories, the typical respondent reported encountering between eight and nine items about psychology during the 30-day period surveyed is an encouraging finding and suggests that, overall, our students are encountering information about psychology in the media on a fairly regular basis.

To further explore the information collected in the survey, we computed a series of statistical prediction models. For each model, the reported use of a specific media category to obtain behavioral science information was used as the criterion, while the respondents' (a) total reported use of the medium, (b) age, (c) class standing, (d) gender, (e) college attended, (f) major, (g) full- versus part-time status and (h) enrollment in an introductory or advanced course were used as predictors. The results of these analyses are summarized in column 3 of Table 2.

Consistently, the bulk of the variance accounted for was attributable to total exposure to a specific medium. To our surprise, demographic factors rarely entered the models at conventional significance levels with the following exceptions: (a) local newspapers were used as a source of information about psychology more often by older respondents, women, and part-time students, (b) education majors reported reading more articles about behavioral science in general audience science magazines than did any of the other majors, and (c) women reported obtaining more behavioral science information from the "other magazines" category than did men. Thus, for the most part, students' exposure to information about psychology in the mass media was similar across campuses, gender, major, course level, class standing, etc.

The association between such exposure and students' general level of use of specific media may reflect the operation of several different processes. For example, it may be that when our respondents wanted to learn more about psychology, they typically turned to the media sources with which they were most familiar. On the other hand, it is equally plausible that psychology students' contact with mass media coverage of behavioral science stems from simply stumbling across it in the course of using specific media for other purposes.

Turning to Tables 3 and 4, these frequency distributions were compiled rather informally, particularly Table 4, from the specific examples of media sources and behavioral science topics

listed by a subsample of 50 of our respondents. They are included here primarily to provide a more qualitative sense of the survey's results. It is worth noting that the information in Table 4 parallels quite closely the results of several other studies that have assessed students' interests in various subtopics of psychology.

General Discussion

The general implications of these results are largely a matter of personal interpretation and will vary with individual differences among psychologists in the values that we hold for our discipline as teachers of psychology, behavioral scientists, and psychological practitioners. In our judgment, the level of contact with behavioral science coverage that was found across all 12 media categories is not as high as we would like it to be. This may reflect a number of things: lack of interest in psychology among our students, lack of coverage of psychological science by the media, poor quality coverage, etc. To the extent that these processes are coming into play, psychologists need to be working more earnestly to generate heightened interest in our field among our students, the general public, and the mass media. In addition, the particularly low use of national newspapers, general audience science magazines, National Public Radio, and public television by our respondents suggests that as psychology instructors, there may be special value in any efforts that we make in our courses to direct our students' attention to the media that tend to provide the highest quality coverage of

psychological science. Such efforts would be of merit not only within the classroom, but also in enhancing our students' continuing education experiences beyond the process of formal education.

Table 1

Media Use Survey
Media Categories as Defined on the Survey Questionnaire

<u>Medium</u>	<u>Definition</u>
National Newspapers	"Newspapers with national and international circulation such as <u>The Christian Science Monitor</u> , <u>The London Times</u> , <u>The New York Times</u> , <u>The Washington Post</u> , <u>The Wall Street Journal</u> , etc."
Local Newspapers	"Newspapers of any size that are not national or international in their circulation."
Technically-oriented Science Magazines	"Science magazines directed toward readers with background and training in the sciences such as <u>The American Scientist</u> , <u>Science</u> , <u>Scientific American</u> , etc."
General Audience Science Magazines	"Science magazines directed toward the general public such as <u>National Geographic</u> , <u>Omni</u> , <u>Psychology Today</u> , <u>Science '81</u> , etc."
Other Magazines	"All other magazines that are not specifically directed toward science coverage such as <u>Cosmopolitan</u> , <u>Family Circle</u> , <u>Newsweek</u> , <u>People</u> , <u>Playboy</u> , <u>Saturday Review</u> , <u>Time</u> , etc."
Books	"Books (other than texts or books read for class assignments.)"
Radio Newscasts	"Radio programming devoted to regular news reporting on any type of radio station -- this category does <u>not</u> include news specials or news analysis programming."
Commercial Radio	"Any radio programming, other than regularly scheduled newscasts, on a commercial radio station -- that is all stations <u>other</u> than educational radio stations and stations affiliated with National Public Radio."
Educational Radio	"Any radio programming, other than regularly scheduled newscasts, on educational radio stations or stations affiliated with National Public Radio."
Television Newscasts	"Television programming devoted to regular news reporting on any type of television station -- this category does <u>not</u> include news specials or news analysis programming."
Commercial Television	"Any television programming, other than regularly scheduled newscasts, on commercial television stations (the network affiliates and independents) -- that is all stations other than educational television stations and stations affiliated with the Public Broadcasting System."
Educational Television	"Any television programming, other than regularly scheduled newscasts, on educational television stations or stations affiliated with the Public Broadcasting System."

Table 2

Media Use Survey
Descriptive Statistics and ANCOVA Results

<u>Medium</u>	<u>Reported "Contacts" with Behavioral Science Information</u>	<u>Significant Predictors</u>
National Newspapers	m ^a = .36 s = 1.33	Tot ^b ($\underline{F}$ = 45.4**)
Local Newspapers	m = 1.36 s = 3.80	Tot ($\underline{F}$ = 24.1**) Age ($\underline{F}$ = 11.9**) Gender ($\underline{F}$ = 8.2**) Attendance ($\underline{F}$ = 5.6*)
Technically-oriented Science Magazines	m = .35 s = 1.94	Tot ($\underline{F}$ = 124.1**)
General Audience Science Magazines	m = .42 s = 1.39	Tot ($\underline{F}$ = 13.7**) Major ($\underline{F}$ = 2.0*)
Other Magazines	m = 1.58 s = 2.34	Tot ($\underline{F}$ = 9.0**) Gender ($\underline{F}$ = 4.9*)
Books	m = .38 s = 1.78	Tot ($\underline{F}$ = 15.7**)
Radio Newscasts	m = 1.11 s = 4.66	Tot ($\underline{F}$ = 13.2**)
Commercial Radio	m = .61 s = 2.76	Tot ($\underline{F}$ = 8.2**)
Educational Radio	m = .11 s = 1.03	
Television Newscasts	m = 1.19 s = 3.21	Tot ($\underline{F}$ = 11.1**)
Commercial Television	m = .60 s = 1.92	Tot ($\underline{F}$ = 4.1*)
Educational Television	m = .12 s = .45	Tot ($\underline{F}$ = 8.7**)

^a m = mean, s = standard deviation

^b Tot = Total reported "contact" with the medium,
Attendance = full time/part time.

* p < .05

** p < .01

Table 3

Media Use Survey

Selected Frequency Distributions^a; Specific Media Sources
of Behavioral Science Information Listed by a
Subsample of 50 Respondents

<u>Medium</u>	<u>Source</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
National Newspapers	Wall Street Journal	7
	Two other papers	<u>1 each</u>
		9 Total
Technically-oriented Science Magazines	Nursing '80	4
	American Journal of Nursing	2
	Scientific American	2
	Five other magazines	<u>1 each</u>
		13 Total
General Audience Science Magazines	Psychology Today	4
	Omni	3
	National Geographic	2
	Two other magazines	<u>1 each</u>
		11 Total
Other Magazines	Cosmopolitan	11
	Newsweek	9
	Glamour	5
	Playboy	4
	Time	4
	Outdoor Life	2
	People	2
	Playgirl	2
	Sports Illustrated	2
	Seventeen	2
	Twelve other magazines	<u>1 each</u>
		55 Total
Television Newscasts	CBS	7
	NBC	4
	ABC	<u>1</u>
		12 Total
Commercial Television	Sixty Minutes	4
	Wild Kingdom	4
	Thirteen other programs	<u>1 each</u>
		21 Total
Educational Television	Body in Question	4
	Sesame Street	2
	Three other programs	<u>1 each</u>
		9 Total

^a The media sources listed by respondents in the other media categories are specific to the locales surveyed and, thus, of limited interest. These data can be generally summarized as follows:

Local Newspapers	46 total listings from 10 different papers
Books	20 total listings, 20 different titles
Radio Newscasts	17 total listings from 13 different stations
Commercial Radio	8 total listings from 3 different stations
Educational Radio	1 listing

Table 4

Media Use Survey

Content Analysis of the Topics Attended to by a
Subsample of 50 Respondents in their Contact with
Behavioral Science Information in the Mass Media.

<u>Content Category</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Business and consumer behavior	16
Current events: Crime	14
Human Sexuality	14
Child rearing, family, and marriage	14
Interpersonal relationships (excludes child rearing, family, and marriage).	13
Animal behavior	12
Personality and individual adjustment	11
Psychopathology: Criminal behavior	10
Genetics	10
Physical health, surgery, and nutrition	10
Education	9
Psychopathology: Serious disturbances (non-criminal)	8
Psychopathology: Mild disturbances (non-criminal)	7
Drugs, Hypnosis, and parapsychology	7
Current events: Foreign Affairs	6
The elderly	5
Sports	5
Other cultures	4
Child behavior and development	3
Experimental psychology	3
Psychotherapy	2
Physiological psychology	2
Miscellaneous	<u>20</u>
	205 Total